David Cayley
Blake was eventually acquitted. Despite the fact that he might very well have damned the king and his soldiers, the case against him was weak. The Sussex Weekly Advertiser reported that when the jury gave its verdict, the audience "threw the court into an uproar with their noisy exultations" -- "in defiance of all decency," adds the Examiner. The trial had put Blake very much in Hayley's debt. Hayley had hired Blake's lawyer, served as a character witness at the trial and generally thrown his considerable local influence behind him. A strange circumstance for Blake, who had been so angry with him such a short time before. The combination of the trial and his earlier tensions with Hayley put him in a pensive mood about his difficulties in making his way in the world and about the way he struck people of milder temperament and less pressing genius than himself.

William Blake's words
"Oh, why was I born with a different face?
Why was I not born like the rest of my race?
When I look, each one starts and when I speak, I offend
Then I'm silent and passive, and lose every friend

... I am either too low or too highly prized.
When elate, I am envied, when meek, I'm despised."

David Cayley
Between the time of his indictment and his trial in the fall of 1803, Blake returned to London. "In London alone," he writes, "can I carry on my visionary studies unannoyed, converse with my friends in eternity, see visions, dream dreams, prophesy and speak parables unobserved and at liberty from the doubts of other mortals." Once back in London, he found himself out of favour as an engraver, but he continued to work for Hayley, and to be, as he calls himself, "Hayley's devoted rebel." Then, about a year after he had returned to London, he experienced an enlightenment. He described it in a letter to Hayley.

William Blake's words
"For now! O glory! and O delight! I have entirely reduced that spectrous fiend to his station, whose annoyance has been the ruin of my labours for the last past twenty years of my life. I was a slave, bound in a mill among beasts and devils. These beasts and these devils are now, together with myself, become children of light and liberty, and my feet and my wife's feet are free from fetters. Suddenly, on the day after visiting the Truchsessier gallery of pictures, I was again enlightened with the light I enjoyed in my youth, and which has for exactly twenty years been closed from me as by a door and by window shutters. Dear sir, excuse my enthusiasm, or rather madness, for I am really drunk with intellectual vision whenever I take a pencil or graver into my hand, even as I used to be in my youth, and as I have not been for twenty dark but very profitable years. I thank God that I courageously pursued my course through darkness."

David Cayley
What had actually happened to Blake is hard to tell, since we know so little of his life, but this letter certainly corresponds with a broader turn in his art. During the revolutionary years of the 1790s, he had been preoccupied with energy, energy in the sense of Eros, life force. "Energy is eternal delight," he says in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell. Now he turns much more to vision and emphasizes the prophetic role of the artist. It isn't a change in the sense of renouncing his earlier ideas, it's a development of these ideas. At the same time, there is also a development in his conception of Christianity. In The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, he describes Jesus as acting from impulse. Now he identifies Jesus with the imagination.

Gerald Bentley
This identification of Christ and the imagination is certainly not visible before this time, and afterwards it is. I think in part it is the discovery that his own mythology, his private invented mythology, can be brought into harmony with not only his own religious life, but a not very uncommon kind of religious life. I don't mean to say that he was ever conventional, but that Christian metaphors, Christian ideals can be reconciled with what he has written before about the four Zoas, about Urizen, Los and so on. And in these respects, therefore, he is not so much turning his back on the old ways as building on them, adding something to them, making them far more meaningful to him. The old poems from Songs of Experience, Visions of the Daughters of Albion, Book of Urizen, all of these seemed closed, despairing and dark eventually, whereas the poetry after this letter are affirmative, finding that the imagination can build, not merely reclaim, not prevent from falling further, but build a new Jerusalem. I don't see any sign of a new Jerusalem in the poetry of the 1790s, during these dark years.

William Blake's words
"Of the sleep of Ulro and of the passage through
Eternal death! and of the awaking to eternal life.

This theme calls me in sleep night after night, and every morn
Awakes me at sunrise. Then I see the Saviour over me,
Spreading his beams of love and dictating the words of this mild song.

Awake, awake, O sleeper of the land of shadows, wake! Expand.
I am in you and you in me, mutual in love divine.

... Return Albion, return...
I am not a God afar off, I am a brother and friend;
Within your bosom I reside, and you reside in me...
Oh Saviour, pour upon me thy spirit of meekness and love:
Annihilate the selfhood in me, be thou all my life."

David Cayley
Blake began writing his poem "Milton" while he was at Felpham, and he engraved the first two copies of it in 1808. It was his reckoning with the figure of John Milton, a poet with whom Blake wrestled all his life, loving him as another inspired man, but passionately disagreeing with many of his views.

Northrop Frye
I suppose this is an example of what Harold Bloom calls the anxiety of influence. That is, Milton and Blake were so close together in their points of view, and yet there were things about Milton which confined him to the 17th century, his very literal view of the Bible. He thought of the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden as literally and historically true. His instincts as a poet drove him in another direction, but still, that was there. And Blake felt that a poem in which Milton was more or less transcended by entering Blake would also be, for Blake himself, a kind of emancipating process.

David Cayley
The poem is about the nature of inspiration and about how it violates our normal understanding of time and space. Its central figure, aside from Blake and Milton, is Los. Los symbolizes the creative imagination, and in a highly charged moment of the poem, Blake fuses with him.

William Blake's words
"Trembling I stood,
Exceedingly with fear and terror standing in the vale
Of Lambeth: but he kissed me and wished me health.
And I became one man with him, arising in my strength.
'Twas too late now to recede. Los had entered into my soul:
His terrors now possessed me whole. I arise in fury and strength.
I am that shadowy prophet who, six thousand years ago,
Fell from my station in the eternal bosom. Six thousand years
Are finished. I return! Both time and space obey my will.
I in six thousand years walk up and down; for not one moment
Of time is lost, nor one event of space unpermanent,
But all remain: every fabric of six thousand years
Remains permanent: though on the earth where Satan
Fell and was cut off, all things vanish and are seen no more.
They vanish not from me and mine. We guard them first and last.
The generations of men run on in the tide of time,
But leave their destined lineaments permanent for ever and ever."

David Cayley
Time for Blake is a medium of creation. We build eternity in time. "Time is the mercy of eternity," he says in another passage from "Milton" "Without time's swiftness, all were eternal torment." It's a view which Michael Ferber believes Blake owes to his roots in the Hebrew Bible. Michael Ferber is the author of The Social Vision of William Blake.

William Hayley's words
The Hebrew culture seems to stress time, history, its own history, starting from the Exodus and going through to the final days, and Christianity inherits that sense of time, a distinct beginning and a distinct end. Whereas the classical culture, Greek especially, but Roman too somewhat, saw time as circular or cyclical and were perhaps more concerned with space, or at least saw politics in spatial terms more than in temporal terms. Now that's far too simple, but Blake comes from the dissenting Puritan tradition of Protestantism which I think revived that older Hebraic notion a bit more, and were very acutely aware of history, of their part in it, of God's plan for it, providence, the end of days, the apocalypse and so on. He inherits this and seems to be more worried about attempts to spatialize things, that is, well, to do what Newton did and to see the universe as a fixed mechanism which has no history, or to see politics as an attempt to freeze social forms eternally. So he wanted time to be the most important term because it's in time that change can take place, that revolutions and revelations can occur.

Kathleen Raine
Newton and modern physics gave us the idea of an invariable, constant, measurable, physical, external universe of time and space. But for Blake, space and

time were not external, measurable. "Length, breadth and height," he said, "must once more obey the divine vision," that is to say, they are experiences. And he talks about Albion in his redeemed state once more "creating space, creating time, according to the wonders divine of the imagination." He says before their fall, Los and Enitharmon, who are the agents of space and time, "at times they would murmur in a flower small as the honey bee, and the space of the flower would open out into a universe." Every child knows this. Or at other times, "they would explore among the stars, expanding and contracting their exalted senses. At will they murmur in the flower small as a honey bee, at will they step from star to star."

William Blake's words

"The sky is an immortal tent built by the sons of Los
And every space that a man views around his dwelling place.
Standing on his own roof, or in his garden on a mount
Of twenty-five cubits in height, such space is his universe;
And on its verge, the sun rises and sets. The clouds bow
To meet the flat earth and the sea in such an ordered space:
The starry heavens reach no further but here bend and set
On all sides, and the two poles turn on their valves of gold.
And if he move his dwelling place, his heavens also move
Where e'er he goes, and all his neighbourhood bewail his loss.
Such aare the spaces called earth and such its dimension.
As to that false appearance which appears to the reasoner,
As of a globe rolling through voidness, it is a delusion of Ulro,
For every space larger than a red globule of man's blood
Is visionary and is created by the hammer of Los,
And every space smaller than a globule of man's blood opens
Into eternity of which this vegetable earth is but a shadow."

Kathleen Raine

The whole of nature exists within the body of the universal divine humanity which he calls the imagination. He calls it "Jesus the imagination." His nirvana is not an empty nothingness, it's a plenitude of intellectual forms. That is nature. Continually nature is welling up from the centres of the birth of life in this fountain of creation. It isn't a structure once and for all. It isn't this mechanism, this soul-shuddering vacuum, which is what he calls Newton's universe. It is a living fountain, it's the tree of life, and that is what nature finally is to him. There is not separation between the creative source and that which is created.

William Blake's words

"Thou hearest the nightingale begin the song of spring.
The lark, sitting upon his earthy bed just as the morn
Appears, listens silent; then, springing from the waving cornfield! loud
He heads the choir of day! -- trill, trill, trill, trill,
Mounting upon the wings of light into the great expanse: Reechoing against the lovely blue and shining heavenly shell:
His little throat labours with inspiration, every feather
On throat and breast and wings vibrates with the effluence Divine.
All nature listens silent to him and the awful sun
Stands still upon the mountain looking on this little bird
With eyes of soft humility and wonder, love and awe.
Then loud from their green covert all the birds begin their song,
The thrush, the linnet and the goldfinch, robin and the wren
Awake the sun from his sweet reverie upon the mountain.
The nightingale again assays his song and through the day,
And through the night warbles luxuriant, every bird of song
Attending his loud harmony with admiration and love."

David Cayley

The climax of the poem comes when Milton confronts Satan. Satan to Blake meant selfhood, the empirical ego, we might say, or the natural man. Satan in this sense is the creator of the world because the world is a product of our restricted vision. In confronting him, Milton is renouncing his self-righteousness and committing himself to live purely by inspiration.

William Blake's words

"In the eastern porch of Satan's universe, Milton stood and said,
'Satan, my spectre, I know my power thee to annihilate
Such are the laws of eternity that each shall mutually
Annihilate himself for others' good, as I for thee.

Thy purpose and the purpose of thy priests and of thy churches
Is to impress on men the fear of death, to teach
Trembling and fear, terror, constriction, abject selfishness.
Mine is to teach men to despise death and to go on
In fearless majesty annihilating self, laughing to scorn
Thy laws and terrors, shaking down thy synagogues as webs.

"I come in self-annihilation and the grandeur of inspiration
To cast off rational demonstration by faith in the Saviour,
To cast off the rotten rags of memory by inspiration,
To cast off Bacon, Locke and Newton from Albion's covering,
To take off his filthy garments and clothe him with imagination,
To cast aside from poetry all that is not inspiration,
To cast off the idiot questioner who is always questioning,
But never capable of answering, who sits with a sly grin,
Silent, plotting when to question like a thief in a cave,
Who publishes doubt and calls it knowledge, whose science is despair.
These are the destroyers of Jerusalem, these are the murderers
Of Jesus who deny the faith and mock at eternal life."

David Cayley
Blake's last illuminated book was called "Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion." The poem comprised 100 engraved plates, twice as many as Milton, and the first copy wasn't printed until 1818, just nine years before Blake's death. As with Milton, the strength of the poem is not its kaleidoscopic narrative, which is fairly confusing, but its wonderful individual moments of vision. The action of the poem is the fall, the sleep and the eventual awakening of Albion.

Kathleen Raine
Albion is the collective being of the English nation. He is England. He is the sleeping lord who has fallen into this deadly sleep of materialism. His deadly dreams are the history of England with its wars, and Blake was writing at the time of the Napoleonic wars. It was an extremely dark moment in English history that Blake was writing in, and it got considerably darker. The dark satanic mills, the enslavement of women and children to the machines, the conscription of the young men into the armies to fight in Europe, all these things which Blake indicts were the deeds of Albion in his alienation from the divine within him. Blake believed that Albion could be awakened, that it was the task of the poets and the men of vision, the poets, painters, musicians, this is the whole thing. Blake believed it would happen.

David Cayley
Jerusalem is very much about the England of its day, the England of the industrial revolution. Blake's attitude can be seen in the way he produced his books -- by hand. His poems were never set in movable type. He saw the machine as the destroyer of labour. Of Albion he says, "His machines are woven with his life." This is one of his descriptions of industrialization.

William Blake's words
"And all the arts of life, they changed into the arts of death in Albion.
The hourglass condemned because its simple workmanship
Was like the workmanship of the ploughman, and the water wheel
That raises water into cisterns broken and burned with fire
Because its workmanship was like the workmanship of the shepherd.
And in their stead, intricate wheels invented, wheel without wheel,
To perplex youth in their outgoings and to bind to labours in Albion
Of day and night the myriads of eternity that they may grind
And polish brass and iron, hour after hour, laborious task!
Kept ignorant of its use, that they might spend the days of wisdom
In sorrowful drudgery to obtain a scanty pittance of bread.
In ignorance to view a small portion and think that all...
Blind to all the simple rules of life."

David Cayley
Wholesome, unalienated work is one of Blake's definitions of truly human life, and his closenss to Karl Marx on this point has always endeared him to Marxists. In fact, according to Michael Ferber, practical, sensuous, energetic activity extends even to Blake's conception of eternity.

Michael Ferber
The most interesting passages in Blake, I think, are his attempt to talk about what eternity is. Now, since he was very much an inner light or "here below" sort of Christian, eternity doesn't seem to mean heaven as a transcendental other place. Eternity seems to be a state

of mind, that we can build eternity here. He certainly says so in his great hymn -- we can build Jerusalem in England's green and pleasant land. But eternity, wherever it is, is not a place where we're all sitting around playing harps or singing songs. It's not like Dante's heaven, where people are sitting at various levels and prepared to give lessons in theology to visitors. It's a place where what's going on is something like what goes on before we attain eternity, the same kind of labouring and debating, and what he calls "mental fight", only it's done in a higher key and without the physical warfare, like what he calls corporeal warfare that plagues the world today. The fighting will be done among brothers and sisters around a table. In fact, I think he thinks of eternity as something like a very lively university where people are coming in from all over and having a long seminar about the most important questions, and we'll all keep growing mentally through our vigorous wrestling with one another. Sounds exhausting, and he does allow, I think, for certain days off in a place he calls Beulah, where we can rest up a bit. But I think what he wants to imagine is a kind of fiery higher form of the sort of thing that he tried to do all the time anyway as he was writing poetry and engraving it.

William Blake's words

"Albion! our wars are wars of life and wounds of love with
Intellectual spears and long-winged arrows of thought;
Mutual in one another's love and wrath, all renewing,
We live as one man; for contracting our infinite senses,
We behold multitudes, or expanding, we behold as one,
As one man, all the universal family, and that one man
We call Jesus the Christ, and he in us and we in him
Live in perfect harmony in Eden, the land of life,
Giving, receiving and forgiving each other's trespasses.
He is the good shepherd, he is the lord and master,
He is the shepherd of Albion, he is all in all,
In Eden, in the garden of God and in heavenly Jerusalem."

David Cayley

The figure of Jesus dominates Jerusalem. He dictates the words of Blake's mild song and he greets the awakened Albion at the end. Throughout Jerusalem, Albion is asleep on a rock under the Atlantic and it is the tireless prophet Los who must continually try to rouse him. Los in his eternal form is called Urthona, or "earth owner," but he turns back from eternity to save Albion.

William Blake's words

"I know I am Urthona, keeper of the gates of heaven,
And that I can at will expatiate in the gardens of bliss.
But pangs of love draw me down to my loins which are
Become a fountain of veiny pipes. O Albion! my brother!
Corruptibility appears upon thy limbs and never more
Can I arise and leave thy side, but labour here incessant
Till thy waking."

David Cayley

Albion does finally wake and arises, and the poem concludes.

William Blake's words

"Then Jesus appeared standing by Albion as the good shepherd
By the lost sheep he had found, and Albion knew that it
Was the Lord, the universal humanity, and Albion saw his form,
A man. And they conversed as man with man in ages of eternity.
All was vision, all a dream...
And they conversed together in visionary forms dramatic which bright
Redounded from their tongues...
Every word and every character was human, and they walked
To and fro in eternity as one man."

Lister Sinclair

William Blake: Prophet of a New Age, was written and presented by David Cayley. Readings from Blake's works were by Barry MacGregor. Other readings by Gillie Fenwick. The series is produced by Damiano Pietropaolo with assistance from Alison Moss. Technical operations, Lorne Tulk.

PART III

Lister Sinclair

Good evening. I'm Lister Sinclair and this is Ideas on William Blake: Prophet of a New Age.

William Blake's words

"Those who have been told that my works are but an unscientific and irregular eccentricity, a madman's

scrawls, I demand of them to do me the justice to examine before they decide."

Lister Sinclair
William Blake wrote these words in a catalogue he prepared for a public exhibition of his paintings in 1809. He hoped that such an exhibition would bring him the public recognition so far denied to him, but he was disappointed. Few people came and the only reviews were hostile. It was a decisive failure for Blake, who lived the rest of his life in poverty and obscurity, his work known only to a handful of loyal patrons and friends. It's hard to think of an artist so highly regarded by posterity who was so completely unknown in his own time. It was fifty years after his death before the first great exhibition of his paintings was assembled and a hundred before the first adequate edition of his poetry appeared. But gradually, Blake began to be understood, not just as an artist of unusual imaginative force or as a symbolist poet before his time, but as a great creative mind, an artist who contained the future -- the prophet of a new age.

Tonight's program is about Blake's career as a visionary painter who believed that the artist must copy a reality more real than nature.

William Blake's words
"He who does not imagine in stronger and better lineaments and in stronger and better light than his perishing mortal eye can see does not imagine at all."

Lister Sinclair
About the failure of his badly attended and badly reviewed exhibition.

Reader
"The praises bestowed last year on this unfortunate man's illustrations of Blair's Grave have stimulated him to publish his madness more largely and thus again exposed him, if not to the derision, at least to the pity of the public."

Lister Sinclair
About the years of obscurity, in which he worked on his great epic poem, Jerusalem.

William Blake's words
"I give you the end of a golden string,
Only wind it into a ball.
It will lead you in at heaven's gate,
Built in Jerusalem's wall."

Lister Sinclair
And about the achievements and the friendships of his final years, when he created his illustrations to the Book of Job and The Divine Comedy and won the admiration of younger artists like Samuel Palmer.

Samuel Palmer's words
"In this most false, corrupt and genteelly stupid town, my spirit sees his dwelling as it were an island in the midst of the sea, such a place for primitive grandeur in the persons of Mr. and Mrs. Blake."

Lister Sinclair
The third and final progam in our series William Blake: Prophet of a New Age, written and presented by David Cayley.

David Cayley
William Blake is known to many people primarily as a poet. When I first fell in love with his poems in high school, I don't think I even knew that Blake was a painter or that he had first published his poems as illuminations in which text and design were completely integrated. In his lifetime, it was the other way around. Such reputation as Blake had was based on his book illustrations. His poetry was known only to a few friends or the occasional purchaser of the Songs of Innocence, and even some of the friends considered his longer poems as little more than regrettable lapses of taste. Blake began his career as an engraver. His family had not been able to afford the expensive training required for a painter, so they had him apprenticed, and in 1779, he set himself up in his native London as a reproductive engraver. Engraving was a living and he was proud of his craft, but Blake always wanted to be an artist in his own right. His difficulty was that once he found his mature style at around age 30, his work was so strikingly original that it seemed wild and uncouth to his more conventional contemporaries, and so his quest for public acceptance was perpetually frustrated. Blake's main difference with the landscape artists and portrait painters of his day was his emphasis on the imagination. He believed that painters should copy not nature but the visions of the inward eye.

William Blake's words
"The prophets describe what they saw in vision as real and existing men whom they saw with their imaginative and immortal organs. The apostles the same. The clearer the organ, the more distinct the object. A spirit and a vision are not, as the modern philosophy supposes, a cloudy vapour or a nothing. They are organized and minutely articulated beyond all that the mortal and perishing nature can produce. He who does not imagine in stronger and better lineaments and in stronger and better light than his perishing mortal eye can see does not imagine at all. The painter of this work asserts that all his imaginations appear to him infinitely more

perfect and more minutely organized than anything seen by his mortal eye. Spirits are organized men."

George Goyder
If you look at one of Blake's pictures, you'll find that it's stereoscopic -- it has depth. It's linear and the figures float. None of those figures in that picture that I'm looking at with you are on the ground. They're all floating. Time and again, Blake's pictures are in the air. They're not in this world. They're not of this world.

David Cayley
This is George Goyder, one of the founders of the William Blake Trust, an organization which has made facsimiles of Blake's works widely available.

George Goyder
Look at his contemporaries, look at Stothard and Fuseli. I mean, they were great artists and thought of as much better artists in their generation than William Blake. But look at their floating figures, they're ridiculous. Or George Richmond, who has a painting which was sold for some huge sum the other day at Sotheby's. The figure is floating in the air, but he looks ridiculous. But Blake's floating figures look genuine because they float in an aura, in a sea, or in the air that the artist himself lives in or has seen, and that's why Blake cannot be written off as a bad artists or a second-rate artist. He succeeds as very few artists have ever succeeded, in my opinion, in conveying the reality of a world beyond this world, which all of us want to know about. But he does it in such a way that he brings it home to us that this reality is here and now and not in the hereafter, that we can grasp it, and he grasps it in his linear characterization of human figures. Somehow they're supernaturally dignified and they make one feel at home. Yes, I know that state, I'm at home. That's Eden, if you like. For me, Blake has been an absolutely seminal influence in my whole life. I owe an enormous debt to William Blake. I hope to see him one day and tell him so.

William Blake's words
"If the spectator could enter into these images in his imagination, approaching them on the fiery chariot of his contemplative thought, if he could enter into Noah's rainbow or into his bosom, or could make a friend and companion of one of these images of wonder which always entreats him to leave mortal things, then would he arise from his grave, then would he meet the Lord in the air, and then he would be happy."

David Cayley
Twice in his life, William Blake thought he had public recognition within his grasp. The first time was in the 1790s, when he was commissioned to design and engrave illustrations for a popular poem called Night Thoughts by Edward Young. The edition failed when the publisher went out of business and Blake was left unacknowledged and virtually unpaid. Then in 1805, he got a second chance. An engraver turned publisher called Robert Cromek commissioned Blake to design and engrave illustrations for another popular poem, this time Robert Blair's The Grave. University of Toronto Blake scholar, Gerald Bentley.

Gerald Bentley
The work was advertised as to bear 15 engravings by Blake after his own designs. And in the same month as that prospectus appeared, there appeared another prospectus which said that there were to be not 15 engravings, but 12, and they were to be engraved not by Blake, but by Luigi Schiavonetti who had a very different style from Blake's. And among other things, the very large sum of money which Blake should have expected to earn from this was therefore lost. Schiavonetti was paid as much as 60 guineas for one engraving, whereas Blake for his whole part was paid apparently about 20 pounds for the designs. And if Blake had been paid 20, 30, 40 pounds per engraving for 12 engravings, that would have been a lot of money. Consequently, there is a simple commercial betrayal. He had been promised commissions and did not get them. Secondly, he had hoped to put his own work in the form which was most appropriate - that is, engraved by the designer -- before the public, and I'm sure he would have been willing to make financial sacrifices to do that. It would have been cheaper to have Blake do it than Schiavonetti. But he also wanted to do it in a style which was peculiarly his own and not the slick, popular, sentimental style of Schiavonetti. And at this point, Blake had sold the drawings. He therefore no longer had any control. He could not prevent the publication of the work by Cromek with the engraving by Schiavonetti instead of by Blake, and Blake was deeply embittered by this. He has scurrilous couplets in his notebook about Chavinetti, and to a significant extent, he seems to be withdrawing from the world after this.

David Cayley
Blake's bitterness about his betrayal by Cromek was not an isolated or unusual feeling. Both as an engraver and a neglected artist, Blake felt keen resentments against the artistic establishment of his day. He also had a considerable talent for invective, and the margins of his copies of the works of those he considered his enemies are full of intemperate, and entertaining remarks. One such enemy was Sir Joshua Reynolds, the president of the Royal Academy when Blake was a young student at the Royal Academy School. Reynolds was a prosperous, socially ambitious portrait painter. There is no evidence he ever wished or did any harm to Blake, but Blake hated him as a symbol of docile, respectable art

William Blake's words
"Having spent the vigour of my youth and genius under the oppression of Sir Joshua and his gang of cunning hired knaves, without employment as much as could possibly be without bread, the reader must expect to read in my remarks on these books nothing but indignation and resentment. The inquiry in England is not whether a man has talents and genius, but whether he is passive and polite and a virtuous ass, obedient to noblemen's opinions in art and science. If he is, he is a good man. If not, he must be starved.

David Cayley
David Bindman, a professor at the University of London and the curator of the Blake exhibition which was held in Toronto in 1982 and '83.

David Bindman
Because he was an engraver, this put him in a slightly different sort of social relationship to other artists. He didn't therefore mix on the whole with painters so much as with other engravers, and this, I think, preserved the sense of distance between Blake's own background and that of the sort of, I suppose main intellectual life of London. I mean clearly he felt that he was a different sort of person from, say, Reynolds, not just that he was painting a different kind of pictures, but that Reynolds was a gentleman, he was not a gentleman, and so on. And so I think this is important because it does tend to mean that Blake's view of the world is essentially a radical one. He is, in the last resort, not part of the establishment, and he knows this and he's quite prepared to see that his future does not lie with them.

David Cayley
Blake had substantive differences with Reynolds as well. In fact, Reynolds' Discourses on the art of painting, with their conventional 18th-century opinions, were a perfect foil for Blake, and the margins of Blake's copy of the Discourses are full of fascinating by-play. "The glory of the human mind," writes Reynolds, "is its disposition to abstractions and generalizations." "To generalize is to be an idiot," retorts Blake. "To particularize alone is the distinction of merit." And so it goes.

William Blake's words
"Reynolds believes that genius may be taught and that inspiration is a lie and a deceit. He believes that man learns all that he knows. I say, on the contrary, that man brings all that he has or can have into the world with him. Man is born a garden, ready planted and sown. This world is too poor to produce one seed. I do not believe that Raphael taught Michaelangelo or that Michaelangelo taught Raphael any more than I believe that the rose teaches the lily how to grow or the apple tree teaches the pear tree how to bear fruit."

David Cayley
In 1809, William Blake made one final bid for recognition. He had already been stung by his betrayal over the engravings for Blair's poem The Grave, and then he had suffered what he thought was a further betrayal when Robert Cromek published an engraving of Chaucer's Canterbury Pilgrims very suspiciously similar to a design of Blake's. So Blake decided to appeal directly to the public. He mounted an exhibition of his works in the home of his brother, James, the home where Blake was born and where James now ran the family hosiery business. The paintings exhibited are described by Blake's Victorian biographer, Alexander Gilchrist, as "singularly remote from ordinary sympathies or even ordinary apprehension." One was called "The Spiritual Form of Nelson Guiding Leviathan." This showed Britain's great admiral, naked but for a loin cloth, standing among the toils of a terrifying rendering of the biblical sea serpent Leviathan. It's a wonderful statement about worldliness and war -- the picture is now in the Tate Gallery in London -- but it's hardly a popular treatment of a national hero. Blake wanted to address the public, but never enough to compromise his vision. This work was one of about 20 which were displayed in the rooms of his brother's house. Henry Crabb Robinson, a contemporary man of letters who cultivated artists and writers, was one of the few who went.

Henry Crabb Robinson's words
"I went to see an exhibition of Blake's original paintings at a hosier's in Carnaby Market. These paintings fill several rooms of an ordinary dwelling house, and for the sight, a half crown was demanded of the visitor, for which he had also a catalogue. This catalogue I possess and it is a very curious exposure of the state of the artist's mind. I wished to send it to Germany and to give a copy to Lamb and others, so I took four, and giving 10 shillings, bargained that I should be at liberty to go again. 'Free, as long as you live,' said the brother, astonished at such a liberality."

David Cayley
Crabb Robinson was not alone in finding Blake's catalogue curious. Even George Cumberland, a loyal, lifelong friend and admirer, thought it "part madness, part vanity," as well as "part good sense." The catalogue was more than just a description of the works on display. It was also a fiery manifesto, written in the unguarded and opinionated style which Blake had previously confined to his notebook and the margins of his books. The brunt of his attack fell on the painters whom he called "blotting and blurring demons," the great Venetian and Flemish painters of the 16th and 17th century. Titian and Correggio are mentioned, as are Rubens and Rembrandt. Rubens, whose works Blake

found to be awash in "a hellish brownness," was particularly singled out for abuse. Behind this attack was Blake's preference for the clear, luminous colours and linear forms of early Italian painting, a preference he shared with the later pre-Raphaelites. The invention of oil painting, he believed, had led to blotting and blurring. It had become "a fetter to genius and a dungeon to art," and produced a muddy, indefinite style suitable enough for the transient effects of nature, but not for the supernatural clarity of imaginative vision.

William Blake's words
"The great and golden rule of art, as well as of life, is this, that the more distinct, sharp and wiry the bounding line, the more perfect the work of art, and the less keen and sharp, the greater is the evidence of weak imitation, plagiarism and bungling. What is it that distinguishes honesty from knavery but the hard and wiry line of rectitude and certainty in the actions and intentions?"

David Cayley
Neither Blake's theories nor his paintings seem to have endeared him to the public. The exhibition was open for about a year, but it attracted few spectators and the only reviews were hostile.

Reader
"The praises bestowed last year on this unfortunate man's illustrations of Blair's Grave have stimulated him to publish his madness more largely and thus again exposed him, if not to the derision, at least to the pity of the public. The poor man fancies himself a great master and has painted a few wretched pictures, very badly drawn. These he calls an exhibition, of which he has published a catalogue, or rather, a farago of nonsense, unintelligibleness and egregious vanity -- the wild effusions of a distempered brain."

David Cayley
This particular review was doubly unkind because it appeared in a radical journal called The Examiner, which might have been expected to be sympathetic to Blake. But though Blake's politics might have pleased the editors, his spiritual enthusiasm clearly did not, nor did his views on the history of art, and the rest of the review was as patronizing as this excerpt. With the failure of his exhibition, Blake's last chance of reaching the public was lost. He never tried again. Little is known of Blake's life in the years immediately after 1810. There are no personal letters and few references to him in contemporary writings. He doesn't really reappear until around 1818, when he began to know the younger painters like Samuel Palmer, who have left us a portrait of his last years. To the eyes of these younger men, Blake seemed a serene figure, happy and at peace with himself. This was not entirely a change. Blake seems to have been happy for much of his life, and in a letter written in 1803, he speaks of "the exceeding joy that is always poured out on my spirit." But as he grew older, he certainly achieved a greater freedom and detachment than he had known during the years of his youth. This detachment is already evident in his notebook writings after 1810. He seems more willing to let the world go its own way and he stresses the eternal sameness of things much more than the possibility of change, as in this passage from his prospectus for his engraving of Chaucer's Canterbury Pilgrims.

William Blake's words
"The characters of Chaucer's pilgrims are the characters that compose all ages and nations. As one age falls, another rises, different to mortal sight, but to immortals, only the same. For we see the same characters repeated again and again in animals, in vegetables, in minerals and men. Accident ever varies. Substance can never suffer change and decay. Every age is a Canterbury pilgrimage...

While we are in the world of mortality, we must suffer. The whole creation groans to be delivered. There will always be as many hypocrites born as honest men and they will always have superior power in mortal things. You cannot have liberty in this world without what you call moral virtue, and you cannot have moral virtue without the slavery of that half of the human race who hate what you call moral virtue.

I am really sorry to see my countrymen trouble themselves about politics. If men were wise, the most arbitrary princes could not hurt them. If they are not wise, the freest government is compelled to be a tyranny. Princes appear to me to be fools. Houses of Commons and Houses of Lords appear to me to be fools. They seem to me to be something else besides human life."

David Cayley
One of the sources of Blake's detachment from history's passing show was his belief in Jesus. He gave final expression to his understanding of Christianity in his last, his longest, and to some, his greatest poem, Jerusalem, the poem he was writing and illustrating during the years of obscurity between 1810 and 1818, when he printed the first copy. Its core is Blake's conception of Jesus as God. Blake uses Emanuel Swedenborg's phrase, "the divine humanity." Kathleen Raine, a lifelong student of Blake, believes that this is the same conception found in the Gospel of St. John. "In the beginning was the word."

Kathleen Raine
Jesus is the word which is in the beginning, which is the image in which man was created, the image and likeness of God. He is that which creates eternally the universe and man himself. In Him we live and move and

have our being. For Blake essentially, you see, God has a human face. Because man bears the image of God, therefore God is that of which man is the image. This is profoundly Swedenborgian. This is the very essence of Swedenborg's teaching. So it is a Christianity which totally, as it were, interiorizes the being of Jesus Christ. Blake actually says that for any single generated human being to assume the role of God is blaphemy because God is in all humanity. Jesus is the divine in all men for Blake, and Jesus not only claimed that he was the son of God, but said that Man was the son of God -- he was the way opener, the first born. This is a very great vision, but essentially for Blake, God is not a faceless abstraction. He is the divine humanity, the imagination.

David Cayley
Blake conceived the way of Jesus as virtually opposite to the way of religion, and much of Jerusalem is about the conflict between these paths. Religion, to Blake, meant morality, and morality meant eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil -- the cause of the Fall. Blake aimed always at Eden, at humanity's unfallen state, and Eden by definition is beyond good and evil.

William Blake's words
"We do not find anywhere that Satan is accused of sin. He is only accused of unbelief and thereby drawing man into sin that he may accuse him. Such is the Last Judgement, a deliverance from Satan's accusations. Satan thinks that sin is displeasing to God. He ought to know that nothing is displeasing to God but unbelief and eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Men are admitted into heaven not because they have governed their passions or have no passions, but because they have cultivated their understandings. The treasures of heaven are not negations of passion, but realities of intellect from which all the passions emanate uncurbed in their eternal glory. The fool shall not enter into heaven, let him be ever so holy. Holiness is not the price of entrance into heaven. Those who are cast out are all those who have no passions of their own because no intellect and have spent their lives in curbing and governing other peoples by the various arts of poverty and cruelty of all kinds. Woe, woe, woe to you hypocrites."

David Cayley
Blake's belief that Christianity supercedes any moral law is not original with him. It's a doctrine which has a fancy theological name -- it's called "antinomianism" -- and a long history amongst the radical Christians from whom Blake was descended.
Michael Ferber is the author of The Social Vision of William Blake.

Michael Ferber
Now antinomianism is a theological term that refers to the doctrine that with the coming of Christ, all our sins are forgiven, and in particular, the Mosaic law, the law of Moses, Deuteronomy and so on, the Ten Commandments, no longer apply to Christians. And you find a version of this even in the main Protestant theologians, Luther and Calvin and so on, but they're very wary of it because the implications are obvious. If you really believe that all your sins are forgiven, it doesn't much matter what you do, and a number of the 17th century radicals adopted it very explicitly and argued that they are free to do what they like, and that the only law is the law of Jesus as they feel it, as they intuit it. Now many of these people were in fact very law abiding and gentle people. A few felt they were free to commit crimes, usually theft, or sexual abandon, or tried various drugs, and some even argued that in order to be a true antinomian, that is, a true Christian, you must systematically violate all the laws that you are told not to. So you could go through the Ten Commandments and all the Book of Deuteronomy and just break them one after the other, and that would show that you are free, you're liberated from these constraints. Well, I think Blake in his personal behaviour was not much like that, but he certainly has nothing but scorn, and you see this throughout his writings, nothing but scorn for the Ten Commandments, for moral codes, for the laws of Britain, which were just impositions on the life, the energy, the inherent gentleness, creativity and love that he thought people would express if they were not distorted by these things.

William Blake's words
"Go, spectre!
Go to these fiends of righteousness.
Tell them to obey their humanities and not pretend holiness.
Go, tell them that the worship of God is honouring his gifts
In other men and loving the greatest men best, each according
To his genius, which is the Holy Ghost in man; there is no other
God than that God who is the intellectual fountain of humanity.
He who envies or calumniates, which is murder and cruelty,
Murders the Holy One. Go tell them this and overthrow their cup,
Their bread, their altar table, their incense and their oath, their marriage and their baptism, their burial and consecration...
He who would see the Divinity must see Him in his children,
One first in friendship and in love, then a divine family, and in the midst,
Jesus will appear.

* * * * *

"I stood among my valleys of the south
And saw a flame of fire, even as a wheel
Of fire surrounding all the heavens. It went
From west to east against the current of
Creation and devoured all things in its loud
Fury and thundering course round heaven and earth.
By it, the sun was rolled into an orb,
By it, the moon faded into a globe
Travelling through the night. From its dire
And restless fury, Man himself shrunk up
Into a little root a fathom long.
And I asked a watcher and a holy one
Its name. He answered, 'It is the wheel of religion.'
I wept and said, 'Is this the law of Jesus,
This terrible devouring sword turning every way?'
He answered, 'Jesus died because he strove
Against the current of this wheel. Its name
Is Caiaphas, the dark preacher of death,
Of sin, of sorrow and of punishment;
But Jesus is the bright preacher of life,
Creating nature from this fiery law
By self-denial and forgiveness of sin.'"

David Cayley

In 1818, William Blake was introduced to John Linnell, one of a circle of younger painters who called themselves "The Ancients." Several of them, including George Richmond, Edward Calvert, Samuel Palmer, and Linnell himself, went on to have successful careers as artists. They called themselves the Ancients because they believed that ancient Man was better than modern Man and they saw in Blake the archetype of the prophet, the visionary seer. They called Blake's modest, two-room flat off the Strand "the house of the interpreter," and Samuel Palmer is said, on one occasion, to have reverently kissed the bell pull before entering. Blake joined them on trips to Palmer's grandfather's cottage in Kent, and they called on him in London. Years later, Palmer recalled these scenes for Blake's biographer.

Samuel Palmer's words

"How well I remember a visit to the Royal Academy in Blake's company. The caprice of memory presents me with the image of Blake in his plain black suit and rather broad-rimmed but not Quakerish hat, standing so quietly among all the dressed-up, rustling, swelling people, and myself thinking, How little you know who is among you.

"In person there was much in Blake which answered to the remarkable man he was. Though low in stature, not quite five feet and a half, and broad shouldered, he was well made and did not strike people as short, for he had an upright carriage and a good presence. He bore himself with dignity, as not unconscious of his natural claims. The head and face was strongly stamped with the power and character of the man. There was great volume of brain in that square, massive head, that piled-up brow very full and rounded at the temples, where, according to phrenologists, ideality or imagination resides. His eyes were fine, 'wonderful eyes' someone calls them, prominently set but bright, spiritual, visionary. Not restless or wild, but with a look of clear, heavenly exaltation. The eyes of some of the old men in his Job recall his own to surviving friends.

"Money he used with careful frugality but never loved it, and believed that he should be always supplied with it as it was wanted, and he worked on with serenity when there was only a shilling in the house. Once he told me he spent part of one of those last shillings on a camel hair's brush. While engrossed in designing, he had often an aversion to resuming his graver or to being troubled with money matters. It put him out very much when Mrs. Blake referred to the financial topic or found herself constrained to announce, 'The money is going, Mr. Blake.' 'Oh, damn the money!' he would shout. 'It's always the money!' Her method of hinting at the odious subject became in consequence a very quiet and expressive one. She would set before him at dinner just what there was in the house, without any comment, until finally, the empty platter had to make its appearance, which hard fact effectually reminded him it was time to go to his engraving for a while. At that, when fully embarked again, he was not unhappy, work being his natural element."

William Blake's words

"I rose up at the dawn of day
Get thee away, get thee away!
Pray'st thou for riches, away, away!
This is the throne of mammon grey

Said I, this sure is very odd
I took it to be the throne of God
For everything besides I have
It is only for riches that I can crave

I have mental joy and mental health
And mental friends and mental wealth
I've a wife I love, and that loves me
I've all but riches bodily

I am in God's presence night and day
And he never turns his face away
The accuser of sins by my side does stand
And he holds my money bag in his hand

For my worldly things God makes him pay
And he'd pay for more if to him I would pray
And so you may do the worst you can do
Be assured, Mr. Devil, I won't pray to you

Then if for riches I must not pray,
God knows I little of prayers need say
So as a church is known by its steeple,
If I pray, it must be for other people

He says, if I do not worship him for a god
I shall eat coarser food and go worse shod
So as I don't value such things as these
You must do, Mr. Devil, just as God please."

David Cayley
The Ancients seem to have known little of the scope of Blake's work. Palmer neither liked nor understood Blake's longer poems, and Linnell remarked that he found some of Blake's religious opinions "sadly at variance with sound doctrine." Both men were pious and conservative, and Blake influenced their work mainly through a small set of wood engravings which he did for a schoolbook edition of Virgil's Pastorals. Palmer particularly was enchanted.

Samuel Palmer's words
"They are visions of little dells and nooks and corners of Paradise. There is in all such a mystic and dreamy glimmer as penetrates and kindles the inmost soul and gives complete and unreserved delight, unlike the gaudy daylight of this world. They are, like all that wonderful artist's works, the drawing aside of the fleshly curtain and the glimpse which all the most holy, studious saints and sages have enjoyed of that rest which remaineth to the people of God. The figures of Mr. Blake have that intense soul-evidencing attitude and action and that elastic nervous spring which belongs to uncaged immortal spirits."

David Cayley
Blake's association with the Ancients, and particularly with John Linnell, resulted in some of Blake's greatest work -- his illustrations to Dante's Divine Comedy, on which he was still working when he died, and his illustrations to the Old Testament Book of Job. During the 1820s, Linnell paid Blake for whatever he produced, which left Blake free to do what he wanted. Earlier, Blake had enjoyed a similar relationship with a government official called Thomas Butts. Blake, who was no diplomat, didn't always have an easy time with patrons. When one potential benefactor critized the obscurity of his symbolism, he told him, in so many words, that he was an idiot. But Butts and Linnell were sympathetic and tolerant patrons, and to them we owe the existence of a large part of Blake's work. One of the first things Blake did for Linnell were the illustrations to the Book of Job, a series of wonderful watercolour paintings which he later engraved. Kathleen Raine has made these pictures the subject of a book called The Human Face of God.

Kathleen Raine
Far from seeing Job, as some theologians have done, as a man of perfection of life and faultless in every way, being deliberately put to the test by God, Blake sees Job as righteous in his own selfhood. That is to say, he was a morally righteous man living according to the outward law. He kept all the rules, he did all the right things, but this for Blake belongs to the world of the individual selfhood, who is, of course, for Blake, Satan. Just as Jesus is the imagination, so is Satan the selfhood. And throughout Blake's long prophetic books, Jerusalem and Milton, what he is attacking is not human wickedness but the selfhood, the righteousness of the individual self, and he sees the morality of the church as being this outward morality which he calls cruel. The true morality is from within. Jesus acted without rules. He acted from impulse, not from rules. That's in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell. When you have contact with the God within, then you have no need for these outward rules. And in particularly the poem Milton, Blake attributes human morality specifically to Satan, who is the human ego and is cruel and condemns and judges, whereas Jesus, the imagination, is forever acting within, spontaneously. And Job had to be absolutely subjected to this tremendous transformation because he was so rooted in his idea of his own righteousness. This had to be broken down. This is Blake's use of the story.

David Cayley
During the time he was working on the illustrations of Job, Blake and his wife Catherine were living in two small rooms off the Strand where the Savoy Hotel stands today. There he was sometimes visited by Henry Crabb Robinson, who had also been at his exhibition in 1809. Crabb Robinson was intrigued by Blake, but he was much more sceptical of him than the Ancients, who were more nearly disciples. He kept a diary of all his meetings with Blake, and with him, we come closest to actually hearing Blake's conversation.

Henry Crabb Robinson's words
"As he spoke of frequently seeing Milton, I ventured to ask, half ashamed at the time, which of the three or four portraits in Hollis's memoirs is the most like. He answered, 'They are all like, at different ages. I've seen him as a youth and as an old man with a long flowing beard. He came lately as an old man. He said he came to ask a favour of me. He said he had committed an error in his Paradise Lost which he wanted me to correct in a poem or picture." I replied, "Might I venture to ask what that could be?" "He wished me to expose the falsehood of his doctrine taught in the Paradise Lost, that sexual

intercourse arose out of the Fall. Now that cannot be, for no good can spring out of evil.'"

"Though very ready to be drawn out to the assertion of his favourite ideas, there was no warmth as if he wanted to make proselytes. Indeed, one of the peculiar features of his scheme, as far as it was consistent, was indifference and the entire absence of anything like reproach. I do not recollect that I ever heard him blame anything, then or afterwards. He had a very extraordinary degree of tolerance and satisfaction with what had taken place, a sort of pious and humble optimism, and at the same time that he was very ready to praise, he seemed as incapable of envy as he was of discontent.

"On the 17th I called on him in his house in Fountain Court in the Strand. The interview was a short one, and what I saw was more remarkable than what I heard. He was at work engraving in a small bedroom, light, and looking out on a mean yard, everything in the room squalid and indicating poverty except himself. And there was a natural gentility about the seeming poverty which quite removed the impression. Besides, his linen was clean, his hand white and his air quite unembarrassed when he begged me to sit down, as if he were in a palace. There was but one chair in the room besides that on which he sat. On I putting my hand to it, I found that it would have fallen to pieces if I'd lifted it, so as if I had been a Sybarite, I said with a smile, 'Will you let me indulge myself?' And I sat on the bed, and near him. He smiled."

David Cayley
During his last years, Blake seems to have been extraordinarily happy and to have made others happy as well. One place where he was always welcome was the Linnell's farm in Hampstead, where he and Samuel Palmer sometimes visited together, as Palmer's son later recalled.

Samuel Palmer's Son's words
"Fortunately for my father, Broad Street lay on Blake's way to Hampstead, and they often walked up to the village together. The aged composer of The Songs of Innocence was a great favourite with the Linnell children, who revelled in those poems and in his stories of the lovely spiritual things and beings that seemed to him so real and so near. Therefore as the two friends neared the farm, a merry troupe hurried out to meet them, led by a little fair-haired girl of some six years old. To this day, she remembers cold winter nights when Blake was wrapped up in an old shawl by Mrs. Linell and sent on his homeward way with the servant, lantern in hand, lighting him across the heath to the main road."

David Cayley
In May of 1826, Blake was seriously ill, and from then on, his health gradually failed. He was 69 years old and he had used himself hard throughout his life. Four months before his death, he wrote to his old friend, George Cumberland.

William Blake's words
"I have been very near the gates of death and have returned very weak and an old man, feeble and tottering, but not in spirit and life, not in the real man, the imagination which liveth forever. In that, I am stronger and stronger as this foolish body decays. Flaxman has gone and we must all soon follow, everyone to his own eternal house, leaving the delusive goddess nature and her laws to get into freedom from all law, into the mind in which everyone is king and priest in his own house. God send it so on earth as it is in heaven."

David Cayley
William Blake died in August of 1827. George Richmond wrote to Samuel Palmer, who was out of town, to let him know.

George Richmond's words
"My dear friend, Lest you should not have heard of the death of Mr. Blake, I have written this to inform you. He died on Sunday night at six o'clock in a most glorious manner. He said he was going to that country he had all his life wished to see and expressed himself happy, hoping for salvation through Jesus Christ. And just before he died, his countenance became fair, his eyes brightened, and he burst out in singing of the things he saw in heaven. In truth, he died like a saint, as a person who was standing by him observed. He is to buried on Friday at 12 in morn. Should you like to go to the funeral? If you should, there will be room in the coach. Yours affectionately, G. Richmond."

David Cayley
William Blake was an artist who felt in his bones the exhaustion of his civilization and he turned away from it in order to explore the endless source of creation within himself. "Would to God," he says, "that all the Lord's people were prophets." He was an artist of extraordinary imaginative force and his images are as full of pity and terror, wonder and love as when he created them. It may be the whole body of his work, or just a single line of poetry, but it reaches out and seizes you. He wanted to make a difference in people's lives, and the better we have understood him, the more difference he has made.

William Blake's words
"Trembling I sit, day and night. My friends are astonished at me,
Yet they forgive my wanderings. I rest not from my great task!